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The Clown, the Criminal, and the Dummy: Alternate Interpretations of Oppositional Behaviors

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Keywords: Adult Basic Education, African American males, Dropout, Student-teacher relationships, Stereotypes

Abstract: Drawing upon the narratives of three African American men who dropped out of school, the paper proposes that oppositional behaviors may be underpinned by self-protective strategies based upon perceived available options and that commonly held stereotypes can lead to the misinterpretation of actions.

Introduction

The causes of disengagement and early departure from public school are of continued importance to adult educators as they contribute to the population of our adult basic education and literacy (ABEL) programs. Although dropout rates have shown a decrease between 1990 and 2011, students of color continue to leave at disproportionately high levels (NCES, 2013). This qualitative study focuses on African American males who are often considered hard-to-reach and yet have a miniscule presence in adult basic education research. The purpose of this paper is to present alternate perspectives of oppositional behaviors and their relevance to adult education. Drawing upon the narratives of three African American men in an ABEL program, I argue that actions perceived as resistance to schooling may be self-protective strategies informed by perceived available options at the time. This information is important for adult educators as we seek to identify and minimize factors within the educational setting that inhibit participation.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Resistance to schooling or oppositional behavior implies agency and have been described as inconsistent attendance, not doing homework, disrupting class, and dropping out of school among others (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Allen 2013). Dropping out is the culmination of a process that includes not only individual choice but structural and environmental factors that influence student decisions (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Scholarship on oppositional behavior among African Americans have primarily pointed to cultural understandings of the limited benefits of education due to racial discrimination (Ogbu, 1992) and a political response to an oppressive school system (Lundy, 2003). Although resistance to schooling among males from different ethnic/racial groups has been documented (Lundy & Firebaugh, 2005; MacLeod, 1995), it has become the identity marker for African American males and an enduring explanation for low academic performance and dropping out of school.

Wharton's (2006) theory of identity construction in a learning environment is useful in explicating this relationship. He notes that the process of social identification within an educational context begins with a societal stereotype that becomes a resource for explaining behavior in a local setting and as these signs of identity (e.g., gender, race, behaviors, dress, skills, and what is said) occur in different events they establish a trajectory of identification that crystallizes the student as a certain type of person. Wharton also points out that as educators we draw upon socio-historical identity models to explain what we do not understand in the local setting. The negative construction of African American male identities is part of the public

mindset (Jackson II, 2006; Rome, 2004) and holds potential to influence adult educators' perceptions of and interactions with young adult African American male learners. In addition, Jackson II's (2006) theory of black masculinities proposes that productive and unproductive behaviors are rooted in strategies of self-protection. Consequently, this paper addresses the question: How does an exploration of the early schooling narratives of African American male students inform our understanding of oppositional behavior?

Research Method

This paper is based on a larger qualitative multi-case study (Stake, 2005) that explored the literacy experiences of African American males (Drayton, 2012). Criterion and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) were used to select six African American men aged 21-64 who were enrolled in an Adult Basic Education and Literacy program. The study took place in a large northeastern city. Data sources included 16 interviews and 19 hours of participant observation. I used Riessman's performance/dialogic approach to examine the what (content), the how (structure), and the why (reason) of the narratives. This approach foregrounds the importance of context in the construction of narratives. That is, the interactional relationship between the researcher and participant, the institutional setting in which the interviews took place, and the larger social discourses that influence what story is told, how it is told, and how experiences are interpreted. The performance/dialogic approach was particularly useful in revealing how the participants constructed their experiences and the meanings they attached to them, as well as discerning subtle changes in their identities. This paper will focus on the early schooling narratives of three participants: Raymond (age 54), Roddy Rod (age 64), and Junior (age 36).

Findings

The men framed the acquisition and development of literacy within a social context indicating that literacy and learning is not de-contextualized. Through the selection and construction of their stories, the men formed identities of students who wanted to learn but faced obstacles that waylaid their goals. The men made decisions based on the options they perceived available to them and the immediate need of their circumstances. Behaviors such as being inattentive, clowning around, and dropping out can be construed as opposition to learning or education in general but the reasons the men provided in the construction of their stories showed their actions to be self-protective strategies.

The Dummy

Raymond's early schooling narrative shows a trajectory of identification that appears to corroborate the local identity and the societal stereotype of Black male students as lacking intelligence. Poverty, parental decisions, and a culture of social promotion within the school combined to position Raymond as that type of marginalized identity within the classroom. He was already 7 years old and behind his age group academically when he started school. In response to his persistent requests, Raymond's parents allowed him to attend school despite their inability to provide appropriate clothing for him which meant that he wore summer clothes in winter. They also could not afford the tutor he would later need to enhance his academic performance.

Raymond described the teachers as "pushing" him forward into higher classes although he could not read – a setup for successive failures and a crystallized identity of the "dummy." In a poignant retelling of his sixth grade experience, Raymond explained his response to the daily verbal assaults from classmates, who called him "dumb" and "stupid," after the teacher labeled

him a “dummy” and his mother could not comply with his request to take him out of school. His response was to “shut down” and thereby protect himself psychologically from a hostile environment. Raymond asserted he “depended” on his pride because it “was all he had.” There were no resources he could draw upon to support his literate identity, the salient identity in the classroom.

For him, shutting down was “the best way” because his mother told him to stay in school but he had to protect himself. Shutting down was demonstrated in behaviors such as sleeping, drawing, not paying attention, and not asking for help when he did not understand class material. His behavior could be misinterpreted as a dislike for learning and laziness commonly associated with African American male students (Caruthers, 2006). However, in his narratives, Raymond constructed the identity of a student who desperately desired to learn but was demoralized into silence. Ironically, he acted out the ascribed identity of the dummy through his silence. Kirkland (2013) insightfully notes in his ethnography of literacy among urban Black male high school students that, “in order to know what is really there...you must search past silence” (p. 40). While some of his participants used silence as a form of resistance, Raymond used it as a form of psycho-social protection. Notably, Raymond had learned to read at the time of the interview and noted that care and high expectations were important in sustaining his engagement and persistence in the adult education program.

The Clown

Similar to Raymond, poverty, parental decisions, and a school culture of social promotion conspired to position Roddy Rod on a trajectory of identification that aligned with the social stereotype of devaluing education and the local identity of class clown. Roddy Rod was the second eldest of 15 siblings and was responsible for taking care of his younger siblings allowing little time, energy, and space to study. He described himself and his older sister as “parents” recalling that “being the second oldest of other younger brothers and sisters just never left enough time to do it [study].” Consequently, Roddy Rod experienced slow academic progress describing himself as having “learning problems” evidenced in his difficulty comprehending various subject matter. He was placed in special education classes and socially promoted.

Roddy Rod thought the teachers’ perceived him to be a “good kid” and a “clown” who did not want to learn. He claimed both identities noting that he was not placed in special education classes because of bad behavior like other kids and that he clowned around or “took it to the next level.” However, Roddy Rod provided a contradictory explanation for the teachers’ assumption of his disinterest. He was “struggling” academically and saw three options available to him: “Do you sit there and cry or do you sit there and try to clown your way through? So you usually clown your way through or you’re the bully all the way through, one or the other.” Roddy Rod’s use of the adverb “usually” and the “generic you” (O’Connor, 1994) implies a common knowledge and experience. In essence, when students’ learning needs are not met students compensate with other social identities that will allow validation among their peers. Roddy Rod declared, “I chose to be the clown, so you know, when you make people laugh they’re happy and they’ll leave you alone.” The latter part of the statement refers to the bullying he endured. Adopting the clown identity was a defensive strategy to obscure the vulnerability of the deficit literate identity that exposed him to ridicule.

At the time of the interview, Roddy Rod had not only learned to read but was at the intermediate GED level. Although program limitations associated with access to one-on-one help and increased frequency of classes were discouraging, Roddy Rod stated he liked the caring

environment of the adult learning program which was characterized by patience, encouragement, and not pushing the students to the next level before they are ready.

The Criminal

Junior's narrative offers insight into how regional differences, expectations, and biases as well as students' responses to them can result in trajectories of identification that align with the recalcitrant Black male student. His mother transferred him from a high school in the Northeast to a school in Georgia to escape gang violence. He constructed the identity of the student who does not fit in and is unwelcomed in the school setting. In explaining his strongly expressed dislike for the school, Junior drew upon several experiences. The most pervasive experience dealt with the monitoring he experienced as a result of being ascribed the social identity of criminal by authority figures in the school.

Junior asserted they believed he "had to be A [drug dealer] or B [robber]" because of the trendy attire he wore. He adamantly averred he bought his "own stuff" with his "own money." Junior described the monitoring he experienced as a result of this perception as "all eyes are on you" which made him feel "uncomfortable." This experience was an instantiation and consequence of the criminalization of Black male identities in the public mindset (Gunn, 2008). Junior described his sojourn at the school as the "treatment of hell." School officials made him feel like an "outcast" even though he was "popular." He noted that the messages he was receiving told him he was in "the wrong school." Consequently, he dropped out of school, worked until he made enough money to travel back to the northeast, and resumed his education at his old school.

Although Junior did not fulfill the expectations of criminality, it nevertheless held negative consequences for him through the student-teacher relationship. Junior's contrast between feeling like an outcast and peer popularity highlights the impact of authority figures on student engagement. Notably, Junior pointed to the significant role teachers play in student engagement in the adult education program through establishing a "comfortable environment for the student."

Conclusion and Implications

Collectively, the men's stories convey that stereotypes "offer inaccurate and damaging perspectives of others" that constrain positive relationships (Jackson II & Dangerfield, 2002, p. 122), promote alienation, and discourage learning and engagement in the classroom. In line with Jackson's theory, the men's responses as adolescents can be considered unproductive behaviors in the sense their actions contributed to slow academic progress and eventual early departure from school, yet protective of their psycho-social well-being. They made decisions based upon experiential knowledge and the options they perceived available to them. Also, the men's stories demonstrate three behavioral responses to alienation, withdrawal, humor, and early departure that may be misinterpreted as disinterest in learning or disrespect for authority. As such this study expands our understanding of oppositional behavior and factors leading to early school departure. In addition, the study supports other research (Belzer, 2004; Rogers, 2004) showing links between early schooling and adult education by drawing attention to a connection between problems experienced in early schooling and their perceived importance in the adult education context.

Because of the pervasiveness of negative stereotyping of low-income Black males perpetuated through various forms of media and implicated in diverse social policies and practices, as adult educators we must examine the sources of our interpretations of Black male student behaviors as well as our interactions with them. The men's stories caution us to consider

how behaviors such as silence, bravado, joking, and inconsistent attendance be indicators of other issues beyond disinterest or disrespect, especially among recent dropouts. As adolescents, the men's schools were sites of alienation though experienced in different ways. It follows then that they would highly value the caring environment of the adult learning program as a key contributing factor to their engagement and persistence in the program. Noguera (2003) notes that Black male students in public school overwhelmingly believe teachers don't care about them. Establishing a caring environment where students feel welcomed, struggling students encounter patience and encouragement, and in the tight walk between accountability measures and student needs, students are not promoted before they are ready. The effective and increased participation of African American men in ABEL programs hinges on an expanded research agenda that includes their experiences in the knowledge base of adult literacy scholarship and practice.

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